

**United Church of Fayetteville
310 E. Genesee Street
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TWO MEN, ONE TENT, NO BUILDING PERMIT 2 Sam 7:1-12 (portions)

Two men, one tent, no building permit is a story of an episode in the life of David, that as Walter Brueggeman says works “at the fine interface of public responsibility and power, and personal temptation and self-deception.” It is a story that begins long before the time of David and Nathan. It is a story that has not ended even in our time. So let’s listen for our story in David and Nathan’s.

David, the king of Israel is happy. With God's help, David has gained the throne of Israel from Saul, his predecessor, now dead. In battle, he has defeated all the enemies of Israel and his kingdom is at peace. For the time being, God has given him rest from all his enemies.

There is more to be accomplished on the home front. To end infighting among the tribes of Israel, he has established a new capital in the city of Jerusalem. The ark of the covenant has just been installed in the city, sheltered in a tent designed for that purpose. As you recall, the people believed wherever the ark was, so too was the presence of God.

Strolling through his new palace, David is grateful to God for all the good things God has done for him. He feels a little guilty at the same time. It doesn't seem right that he should live in a palace of finest cedar, built by skilled artisans, while the Lord lives in a tent. David gets an idea. Why not build God a temple!? The more grand he makes it, the finer the materials he uses, the more David’s gratitude will show!

Almost as an afterthought, it occurs to him there might be some other benefits in building a permanent home for God in Jerusalem. As long as the ark is sheltered in a tent, it is possible for the presence of God to be removed from his city. But, if David makes the ark a permanent resting place in a great and glorious temple, it won't be long before the City of David and the City of God become inseparable in people's minds. It would make ruling this contentious people a lot easier. Built for the best of reasons, surely no one is going to begrudge him this one little perq.

Just to be on the safe side, David sends for a member of the palace’s prophet pool. It’s Nathan’s turn. All we know about him is that he is a prophet. This is the first time he is mentioned anywhere. We don't know how he came to be attached to David's court or if they’d met before, or what kind of relationship the two of them had, other than the official ones of king and prophet. But Nathan is a prophet – a spokesperson for God -- a recognized connection between the human and the divine. That is reason enough for David to consult him about this undertaking. So David runs his idea for a temple by Nathan.

Nathan considers David's idea. He has to admit, “It's a good one.” A rich temple will show David's gratitude and piety, not to mention his power and worth. (Nathan is human enough to know that the prophet attached to the court of a powerful man will also be a powerful man.) Besides, a big building project like that will be just the thing to stimulate Jerusalem’s stagnating economy and pull people together after the wars.

It also occurs to Nathan, as it did to David, that if the presence of the Lord is associated with Jerusalem, the presence of the Lord will also be associated with the government of Jerusalem -- that is David. That's nothing new. The Lord has been on David's side from the beginning. David's success is proof of that. The presence of the Lord is already associated with David. A temple will just make visible what everyone already knows. Nathan says, "Build, David. The Lord is on your side." Then, king and prophet each go their ways.

That night before Nathan fell asleep, he lay in bed thinking and praying about David's plans. Then he thought about God's history with the whole people of God. A strange, unwelcome thought occurred to him. He started wracking his brain, but as he remembered every encounter God had with Israel's leaders and prophets, from Moses to the present, try as he might, he couldn't think of a single time God complained about living in a tent. Oh, people had built monuments from time to time to commemorate an encounter with God, but even those were always the people's idea. Not God's. He was going to have to remind David of that. Nathan realized this temple building might well be David's idea, not God's -- a case of the political tail wagging the scriptural dog. Not necessarily, but something they needed to look at more closely.

Then Nathan started to think about David -- his rise from shepherd to king. Faithful and doing what he thought the Lord wanted him to do -- a little too enthusiastic at times, David was a good man nonetheless. No wonder God was on his side, making everything he touched turn out for the good. Then Nathan smiled at himself. How easy it was to slip into that kind of thinking. How easy it was to forget that David was a winner because God made him one -- that it was God who chose David when he was a shepherd -- that God kept him safe and made him victorious in battle -- that God made him king. God wasn't on David's side because David was successful. David was successful because David was God's chosen instrument to fulfill God's ends. How easy it was to forget that! And if it was easy for Nathan, how much easier would it be for David? In the morning, Nathan would have to remind David of those things too.

Nathan thought again about David's plans for a house for the ark. If God wanted such a house, God could build it without David's help, that was for sure. Nathan realized houses made out of cedar and gold aren't the only kind of houses. He thought about what kind of house God might want. He remembered all God's promises to the people of Israel from the time of Abraham and from the time of Moses. Promises that one day the people would live in a land they could call their own -- a land where they could raise their children and not send them off in wars to protect it against their enemies. The kind of house God needed to do that wasn't a temple. What God needed was a dynasty -- a family that would provide stable and strong leadership -- a family that would do to God's justice for the people of Israel from generation to generation. Nathan smiled again. David wasn't going to build a house for the Lord. The Lord was going to build one for David. The Lord was going to give David a name that would ring through history and a family that would remember the Lord through all its generations. For the sake of the people of Israel, David's house was going to live forever.

Oh, someday, someone would build a temple for the Lord. When things were going so smoothly that the people forgot why they needed the house of David. Then one of David's descendants would build a house for the Lord so the people would remember whose side the Lord was on. But the people didn't need that reminder now. The signs were all around them.

Then Nathan stopped smiling. He couldn't explain it, but knew that the Lord wanted him to tell all these things to David. He knew too that David wasn't going to like hearing that his great and glorious plan wasn't what God wanted. He worried because, as far as Nathan knew, this was the first time David's plans and God's weren't in synch. No telling how David was going to handle it. Or even more worrisome, what David would do to the prophet who came bearing the bad news. There was good news too, but who knew if David would wait long enough to hear it before he blew his stack. Nathan knew now why someone once said, "There is no evidence to suggest that anyone ever invited a prophet to dinner more than once." Nathan lay awake most of the night, going over it all again and again in his mind. By morning he was only more certain that the Lord had indeed given him a word for David.

David thought Nathan didn't look well when he arrived at the palace the next morning. There were dark rings under his eyes as though he hadn't slept well. David hadn't slept either, but he felt great. He'd spent most of the night making sketches of the temple he was going to build for the Lord. When he started to unroll his plans to show them to Nathan, Nathan got a funny look on his face. Something was bothering him and he looked nervous. David told him to spit it out, whatever it was. He regretted it almost as soon as Nathan started to talk.

In the beginning David was angry. Just because God had never asked for a temple before, didn't mean God didn't want one now. Nathan seemed certain that the Lord had said there wasn't to be a temple now. For a minute, an evil thought crossed David's mind. David's eyes narrowed as he looked speculatively at Nathan. Only he and Nathan knew that the Lord had said, "No." If Nathan were to die, no one but he would know, and no one would miss one prophet from the court's vast supply.

Then David shook his head. He knew history almost as well as Nathan did. There was one thing it showed again and again, even if the people didn't learn. Killing one of God's prophets, just because you didn't like the message they brought, didn't stop God from working God's will in the world at all. God just chose another way, another messenger.

David felt guilty and humbled when Nathan talked about all the ways God had secured his success and his kingship. Nathan was right. David had forgotten. He had known when the events happened, but as time went on and he became more powerful and had more wives and more people flattering him, with hopes of favors and getting power of their own, it was easier to forget. Most people told him what they thought he wanted to hear. Unfortunately, right now, Nathan wasn't most people.

Looking at Nathan again, he thought maybe that was the difference between a prophet and the people who weren't prophets. All the people of Israel knew their history. They could all compare what they knew from the past to what lay before them. It seemed that prophets were the ones willing to tell what they saw and how they interpreted it. They were willing to say what other people weren't willing to say. They were willing to speak the word they believed God had given them. Prophets risked ridicule if that word didn't match up with what the people already knew about God. Prophets risked death when the people suspected that word was true, but they didn't want to hear it.

By now Nathan was talking about the dynasty God was going to build through David. At first, David wanted to cry from disappointment -- disappointment that he wasn't going to build a temple -- that his pretty dream wasn't going to come true.

Then David did cry. Not from disappointment, but in wonder-filled humility at the new dream God offered in its place. He cried as he realized that God dared to dream for the people of Israel beyond the hopes the people dared to dream for themselves. He cried because God had chosen him, David, shepherd and king, to help make it come true.

And it all came to pass, as the Lord said it would. Perhaps not as David and Nathan pictured it, but as the Lord said. David did not build a temple. The Lord did build a dynasty in David's name. David's name and his house have not perished from the earth. And so the story that began long before the time of David and Nathan continues into our own day.

From that day to this, David's house is distinguished from all the other houses on the earth. It is distinguished by those willing to be the instruments of the Lord and those who wish to make the Lord their instrument. It is distinguished by those who are willing to have their plans fine-tuned by the word of the Lord, and those who proof-text their dreams with Scripture.

From that day to this, there are still those who hope ignoring the prophetic voice means the message will fade away. People are still tempted to kill the prophets who bear the word they don't want to hear.

From that day to this, God continues to pour out the Spirit on all God's sons and daughters. Still the difference between those who are prophets and all the rest is the same as it was in David and Nathan's time. Some are willing to speak the word they have been given and some are not. Some are willing to do the word they hear, and others are not. And so it is that to this day, the house the Lord built for David still exists among us.

Let us pray: God of all history and Lord of each of our stories: Help us to find our place in your story and to fulfill our roles in your household. By your power, make us your instruments and by your Spirit, may we dare to speak the word you give us to speak. Amen.